Implementing Plan Colombia:
Strategic and Operational Imperatives for the U.S. Military

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At the start of a new administration and in light of the U.S. commitment to provide $1.3 billion of assistance in support of Colombia's counternarcotics efforts within the context of Plan Colombia, The Dante B. Fascell North-South Center at the University of Miami and the Strategic Studies Institute at the U.S. Army War College held a major conference in Miami, Florida, on February 1-2, 2001. The intent was to clarify issues, focus the debate, and learn from it. As a result, a diverse group of 263 U.S., Colombian, other Latin American, Canadian, European, and Japanese policymakers, opinion leaders, civilian and military officials, and academics participated in the conference.

The point and counterpoint of the conference dialogue centered on several highly interrelated themes. In developing these themes, we began to understand much of the uncertainty and confusion that permeated the discussions involving U.S. policy in Colombia and the implementation of Plan Colombia. In this connection, we found answers to some fundamental questions that many U.S. citizens--and others--have begun to ask. They are: "Why Should Colombia Matter, Why Should It Matter Now, What Should Be Done, and What Are the Implications for the Military?" Answers to these questions indeed clarified issues, focused the debate, and generated a number of lessons to be learned. The outstanding work done by all who participated in the conference, however, cannot be summarized in this document. Suffice it to say that abstracts of all the presentations, a special series of monographs, and an anthology of the "best of the best" will be published and distributed, beginning within the next few weeks.

"Why Colombia?"

Within the context of the Western Hemisphere, Colombia is important to the United States because of its potential for further development of democratic and free market institutions and human rights; its potential for increasing (legal) bilateral trade; and for its potential for cooperation on shared problems such as illegal drugs, illegal immigration, and environmental issues. More specifically, Colombia is a significant trading partner of the United States and a key component of the Latin American and the global economic equations.

As examples, Colombia's two-way trade with the United States amounts to $10 billion per year, it is South America's fourth largest economy, and it provides the fifth largest U.S. export market in Latin America. Moreover, the Western Hemisphere accounts for nearly 40 percent of U.S. two-way world trade, compared to 33 percent for the Pacific Rim and 21 percent for Europe. At the same time, two of the four largest suppliers of energy to the United States are Venezuela and Colombia. Within the interdependent global economy and security environment, the argument is uncomplicated. That is, as these interests are maintained and enhanced in Colombia, they enhance the stability, prosperity, and well-being of the hemisphere and the global community. However, to the extent that these interests are not maintained and enhanced in Colombia, they degrade the potential of the region and the world. Clearly, significant interests are at stake.

"Why Now?"

The problem, at the moment, is that Colombia and its potential are deteriorating because its three ongoing and interrelated wars--insurgency, illegal drug trafficking, and growing vigilante paramilitary movements--are directly threatening the democracy, economic progress, and social fabric of that country. Internal deterioration may be illustrated by three facts. First, violence associated directly with internal turmoil is claiming over 3,500 lives every year. Second, it is generating over 1.5 million displaced persons and 800,000 emigrants who are finding new homes in other countries in Latin America, the United States, Europe, and Canada. Third, Colombia's internal turmoil is also generating a contracting economy that declined by more than 5 percent in 1999 and produced 20 percent unemployment, and brought about the worst recession since the 1930s.

Colombia's three wars also indirectly threaten the stability and well-being of its neighbors. In this connection, narco-traffickers have, for some time, operated back and forth across Colombia's borders and have taken violence, corruption, and criminality wherever they have gone. Colombian insurgents and paramilitary groups have also made frequent incursions into the neighboring counties of Brazil, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela. The resulting violence and instability is undermining the sovereignty, security, and well-being of these countries. Another negative result of the turmoil in Colombia and the region--the abundant flow of illegal narcotics into the United States--is sufficiently obvious and well documented not to require much elaboration. Suffice it to note that illegal drug use in the United States kills some 52,000 people every year; and costs an estimated $100 to $500 billion per year for health care, accidents, and lost productivity.

Most important, that Colombia's current situation has reached crisis proportions is now explicitly recognized. It is important to caution against an alarmist prognosis. Yet, it would be irresponsible not to note that the illegal drug trafficking, paramilitary, and insurgent organizations operating in Colombia are perpetrating a level of corruption, criminality, humanitarian horror, and internal instability that--if left unchecked--can ultimately threaten the collapse of that state and undermine the positive political sovereignty of its neighbors.

"What Is To Be Done?"

The urgent problem for decisionmakers and policymakers is to analyze the seriousness of the crisis in Colombia and decide exactly what to do beyond what is already being done under Plan Colombia. Significant current activities appear to be focused on the $1.3 billion of U.S. military support to the drug war. To date, European and Japanese contributions to the social and economic components of Plan Colombia have been meager. The Colombian contribution to the plan to make up the balance of the entire $7.5 billion package has not been made transparent. In that connection, activities addressing problems such as crop substitution, judicial reform, and human rights appear to be ad hoc and piecemeal, and based on "crisis control" rather than a coherent, coordinated plan of action. This disjointed approach is not reconciling the aspirations listed in Plan Colombia with the reality of the strategic situation in the country and the region. As a consequence, there is considerable confusion, frustration, and uncertainty concerning the intent, objectives, and viability of the plan.

A lack of cooperative, holistic, and strategic-level involvement in Colombia is generating great risks for that country and the world around it. In light of the dynamics of Colombia's three wars, worldwide concern is warranted. In that connection, Colombia's focus on the operational micro-

level drug war security question in the short term leaves strategic macro-level security, political, economic, and social issues to be dealt with in the future--by others--and leaves much to be desired. The drug issue is only one piece of a larger and more complex strategic puzzle. Solving the Colombian puzzle will require a long-term and holistic strategic solution. It is time for the United States, Colombia, and the global community to go beyond the present uncertainties of Plan Colombia, and deal more vigorously and cooperatively with an urgent agenda that greatly affects the interdependent global economic, political, and security arena.

Implications for the Military.

Since the end of the Cold War, the international security system has undergone fundamental changes. In place of the relatively orderly and predictable Cold War structure, the "new world disorder" has generated a system in which time-honored concepts of security and the classical military means to achieve it are still necessary but no longer sufficient. The situation in Colombia, as one example, is one in which ambiguous nontraditional, intranational, national, transnational, regional, and global popular "well-being" considerations--as opposed to traditional interests--are paramount. By transforming the emphasis of conflict from military violence to a multidimensional struggle for popular "well-being," a violent internal foe--or set of foes, as in the Colombian case--makes conflict highly political and psychological, as well as military. Instead of simply attempting to obtain leverage and influence for limited concessions in the near term, violent internal opponents now strive for the complete overthrow of a state in the long term. Thus it appears that, in the global security environment in general and in the Colombian situation in particular, conflict is the result of careful political calculation and a combination of political-psychological-violent action. In ironic philosophical rhetoric, modern conflict turns Clausewitz upside down. War is not an extension of politics; politics is an extension of war.

In these terms, attempting to resolve the conflict in Colombia is not a strictly military-police effort. It is essentially a political-moral effort. The most refined tactical doctrine and operational art carried out by the optimum military or police structure in pursuit of a strategy that ignores the populace will be irrelevant. Nevertheless, the military has an important role to play in the Colombian situation. That role, however, must be based on the correct identification of a range of actions--and in proper proportions--that is subordinated to and in support of the larger political, economic, social, and security components of Plan Colombia.

Thus, military leaders, planners, and implementers would do well to scrutinize seriously a long list of strategic and operational imperatives that may be derived from the conference presentations and related discussions. A short list, however, would focus on the power of the interagency process when used correctly and the impotence of unilateral actions even when "leading in support." It would include the notion of engagement versus direct involvement. It would take into account regional, hemispheric, and global implications. It would develop the concept of multiple centers of gravity--to include public opinion and leadership. The list would stress the power of information and public diplomacy and the penalties that are paid when these instruments of power are not used, channeled, or harnessed. It would recognize the need to redefine "enemy," "power," and victory" in terms of the political-psychological-moral nature of contemporary conflict. It would seek to harness the concepts of "asymmetric warfare" and "deterrence" in terms of culture and motives rather than just weaponry and tactics. Finally, the list would include two cautionary notes. First, it would acknowledge that it is as essential to learn how to defend one's own centers of gravity as it is to attack those of an opponent. Second, it would emphasize that contemporary conflict is not "limited"; it is--in fact--total.

Conclusions.

The uncertainty and confusion that pervaded the conference dialogue as well as the questions that were generated from it reflect two common denominators: 1) a radically different security environment than that addressed; and 2) the lack of a cooperative, holistic, and long-term foreign policy and military strategy to deal with it. These are the two most salient of the many lessons learned. A more difficult matter is that of assimilating these fundamental lessons and rethinking the Colombian problem--and the response. The United States and the international community now have the opportunity to redirect policy that, in the past, has been essentially ad hoc crisis management to one that is proactive and positive--and to which people can relate. By accepting this challenge, decisionmakers, policymakers, opinion makers, and other leaders can help fulfill the promise that the conference dialogue and learning from it offer.

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